

Schools: Go for the grand bargain, ASAP

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Both legislative houses assemble in House chambers Jan. 14 for the governor's annual State of the State address. On Thursday, the Washington Supreme Court held legislators in contempt for lack of progress on paying for public education.

ELAINE THOMPSON — The Associated Press

The state Supreme Court could have thrown punches or pulled punches Thursday when it responded to lawmakers' lack of a plan for fully funding the schools. Wisely, it did neither.

The court didn't go wobbly on its 2012 mandate to provide ample funding for public education by 2018. Nor did it get punitive. Instead, it told lawmakers, "Give us results, not excuses."

At this point, Washington lawmakers need a paradigm shift.

Democrats and Republicans share power in Olympia, the former controlling the House and the latter controlling the Senate. The process of writing budgets has been rife with partisan disputes. There's nothing inherently wrong with that: Political arguments are part of democracy.

But both parties are now coming up hard against the Washington Constitution, which states that their “paramount duty” is to offer all the state’s children a basic education, the kind of schooling they need for the 21st century.

That means coming up with perhaps \$2 billion more a year to cover more instruction time, more teachers, smaller classes through third grade, and other priorities the Legislature itself has identified as necessary for a basic education.

The heavy political lifting has to happen in the 2015 session; 2016 is a short, non-budget year, and 2017 is too late.

Finding that kind of money is going to be tough, because the Legislature has to walk and chew gum at the same time. The public schools must be funded – yet the highways can’t be left rotting, the mentally ill sleeping under bridges or the safety net in tatters.

Nor can lawmakers further cannibalize higher education. The shrinkage of college opportunity in this state is already doing massive damage. Washington now leads the West in the rate of students who leave the state for distant universities – a self-inflicted brain drain.

Lawmakers won’t get to full funding for the schools with business as usual.

The custom is to defer passage of the state budget to the very last days of the session – and often not pass it even then, but squabble over it in special sessions. This time, though, the squabbling ought to get started long before January.

After the November elections, the legislative leaders and budget-writers of both parties must sit down and start negotiating the grand bargain they’ll need. It’s hard to imagine them getting this monumental job done this winter with the usual coyness, hostage-taking and eleventh-hour stare-downs.

The high court has been explicit: Things will get ugly and sanctions will be forthcoming if the session produces no clear path to 2018. The justices might be tempted, for example, to strike down a budget that doesn’t satisfy the demands of the 2012 McCleary decision.

Lawmakers would be wise to think of the 2015 session as a room they can’t leave until they satisfy the court. Most want to do it. There is common ground. Why waste time finding it?

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